[Theme music ‘Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here’ by Theo Goodwin]

INTRO

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The Underwood Collection, Episode Nine: Afterdamp

[*Tape recorder clicks on. Tape static is heard continually throughout.*]

MORGAN

Alright, U, let’s see what you’ve got for me. This meeting with Adriene and Callum had *better* be important. I *do* have a job to do, you know.

Okay, this is- Case #0090530. Ulysses, I understand that you’re not here, but *you should not be giving me any statements beginning with zero zero nine when you’ve previously given me statements beginning with zero one six.* We’ve discussed the fact that going chronologically *is,* in fact, important, because I’m already trying to figure out how to organise all of these efficiently when half of them won’t upload to our digital records. You *know* this. Just because you’re the Curator doesn’t mean you pick and choose what information is worth *keeping.* That is not the *purpose* of an archive.

That said, I - don’t know how to find a more appropriate statement, because *I do not understand your organisational system, if it exists at all.*

So. Fine. Case #0090530. Statement of Susannah Moore, regarding a pet canary she kept in her home for several months. Original statement given May 30th, 2009. Morgan Gaiman, Usher Foundation archivist, recording.

Statement begins.

My family has always been keen on birds. Kept many throughout my childhood, dad even tried the whole 'pidgeon racing' thing for a while, big massive shed full of them 'round the back of the house. It became so much that by age ten, I could barely sleep without that comforting sound of some species or another we were sheltering cooing gently.

And that's why when I finally got my own place, I got a canary. They're as low maintenance as birds can get, really. Small things, perfect for the apartment I crammed myself into straight out of college, not very sociable as birds go, preferring their own company to a cagemate, and they don't need a whole lot of attention besides something to play with and someone to feed them, content to warble their little song from their perches.

And I know the story about their songs. Everyone thinks they're very original, telling me it as soon as I bring up keeping one as a pet. 'Did you know they used to be kept in coal mines? Would sing if it was about to collapse.' I'd try to be polite, but there's only so many times you can hear it before it starts to grate on your nerves.

Because my Sylvester wasn't like that. He was a pet, intended to be a friend and companion as I navigated my way into the adult world, not some disposable utility kept around in case someone failed to uphold an as yet non existent OSHA regulation.

And I loved him, this round little yellow thing, as picturesque as a canary could be, really, almost cartoonish in it (A reason I felt so proud of his name). He was the last left in the shelter, and I could never quite figure out why, entirely charmed with him from the minute I laid eyes on him, caging and seed bags already packed up in the car and ready to go.

But Syl was always…. Odd. I tacked it down to being alone in the shelter for too long, all his siblings already taken, leaving him the sole bird in that massive cage built for a whole flock. He was never any trouble, just ate his seed or pellets, drank his water, and would flit from perch to perch.

That was one of the weird things, at least. Canarys aren't climbing birds, by nature, much more inclined to flit between their posts, but while he was perfectly capable of flight, Syl much preferred to jump from one to

another, or climb the little rope ladders I had set up between them. Another was his singing.

He didn't, at first. A quiet chirp here and then, a joyous chittering whenever I came home or greeted him in the morning, which never failed to bring me joy itself, but never that sweet song canaries are famed for. I spent plenty of time googling what I could be doing wrong. Was he unhappy? Unwell? Was it somehow my fault, as his caregiver, that he didn't do the one thing expected of him? In the end I simply wrote it off as personality. He seemed plenty content and stimulated in the biggest cage I could wedge between my sofa and bookshelf, never left alone for more than a few hours at a time without a neighbour calling in to check on him, and the cage door left open whenever I was home so as he could flit about the living room and kitchen as he saw fit.

And that was the final thing. He *never* left his cage. Not once. When I brought him home I transferred him immediately from the temporary plastic caging into his fully sized one, not wanting him to have free roam just yet incase he panicked and hurt himself or escaped, not used to his new surroundings. I soon after began to give him free reign, though, trusting him not to do anything stupid, but he never even tried. Just stood on his perch, staring at me inquisitively, little beady eyes examining the open door like some kind of puzzle I'd placed in front of him.

And so I got sick of it one day. Became annoyed, really, more than I should have at a bird, but so concerned that his situation was a self imposed imprisonment that I became so determined to get him over it. So I reached my hand into the cage and waited for him to climb onto my finger, wrapping his feet around it and chirping happily at the contact.

And then I pulled my hand back, back out of the cage and into my living room.

… Sylvester began to sing for me. And it was unlike any song I had ever heard. That ungodly wailing, I don't know how it came from a body so small, something so sharp and yet with such a depth to it. It set my teeth on edge, and I could feel this *pressure* bearing down on me, like a weighted load had been placed on my shoulders. I crumpled to my knees, unable to stand under the strain, and Syl soared back up from my hand to return to his perch, quiet again.

When I recovered, I locked the cage. I was pretty rattled, but I must have figured it was several kinds of coincidence. That Syl was afraid, so of course a songbird singing in fear would sound unpleasant, and that there was no correlation between it and the waves of nausea pulsing their way over me. In the end, I just went to lie down for a while.

The second time was several weeks later. I'd mostly pushed the first incident from my head, brushing it aside for whatever logical conclusion I could conjure. I tried to lure him out this time, seeds placed around the room in a trail leading away from the cage. Then I sat back to watch if he would follow. And he did. After some time of what was clearly him weighing his options, he finally flitted out, landing on the arm of the sofa where I had placed the nearest pile.

He picked them up gently in his beak, making quick work of the first snack I laid out for him. The singing started up as he made his way forward, towards the next one. The same thick warble, like it was reverberating around a space at once larger and more confined than the four close, boxy walls of my living room. And I felt those walls close in around me. Not literally, of course, though if that had happened, from what I know now, I would hardly be surprised. No, they stayed exactly where they'd always been. Felt like they hadn't though, that crushing, unbearable force pinning me down, unable to move for the feeling of *something* pressing down on me from all sides, constricting my chest, weighing down my legs, tears welling in my eyes from the pressure on my skull.

I struggled up eventually, limbs feeling held back even as I passed through nothing, the effort of standing straining on me as I grabbed Syl, a little rougher than I would have liked, but it's not as if I was cut out for delicate movement at the time.

I feel bad to say I *shoved* him back into the cage, but I'll admit it's probably the description that fits the best. I was panicked, nerves searing with force arguing violently with what I saw and knew was true, that there was nothing around me, no pressing force, nothing to bind me down, and yet I felt trapped, bricks and mortar and cold, dark earth raining down on me, placed there by the melody of my closest friend.

I didn't open the cage for a while, after that. Not even to leave casually ajar, just kept it closed, and at one point I was this close to buying a padlock for it, had I not talked myself into some sense. Still, I was…

Rattled. And rightly so, I think. Didn't tell anyone, didn't want to seem like the crazy bird lady, but I was wary now, jumpier. I didn't go anywhere I couldn't at least stretch my arms without touching a wall, which admittedly made entering my walk in linen closet quite a challenge, but who needs one when you can just rewash what's in your drawers, living in fear that the off-white painted walls and plywood shelving might collapse in on you if you try to retrieve fresh bed sheets?

The bruises on my ribs and calves settled my mind, in an odd way. Reassured the horror that it had happened, yes, but calmed my fraying nerves that, yes, *it had happened*.

The third time, *I* did not open the cage.

I had been working late that day, and so asked my neighbour, Luka, to check in on Syl as he often did. I think he'd always fancied me a bit, always obliging, even once cancelling his own plans to make sure my bird was okay; not that he'd ever tell me that, just heard it in the laundry room. That's why he had a tendency to try to be *nicer* than required of a simple 'Check the bird hasn't gone parched from lack of water'.

There was a note, tacked to my door, waiting for me when I came home that day. Two bullet points, precise and neat. Number one: Luka had left a lasagna in a plexiglass on the table for me, knowing I likely wouldn't have time to cook, being home late, and also, knowledge courtesy of one memorable visit from the fire department, that I was generally a terrible cook.

Number two: Luka had left the cage open. This caused me to freeze, hand on the outside door, heart almost skipping a beat in this newly developed pavlovian response to even the thought of Syl outside his cage. I could almost hear it, the flitting of tiny wings from behind the thin wood, and my mouth was dry. But he did not sing.

I steeled myself, and pushed the door open, quickly shutting it behind me. Syl was on the coffee table, perched on the edge, looking inquisitively up at me. I crumpled almost preemptively at the opening of his beak, before the first note even escaped, better to pull myself down than be dragged by the shaking of my knees and ache in my spine. But the notes did come, and I could barely hear them over the rumbling that filled my ears.

I choked. Fingers clawing at my own throat, desperately trying to free airways that felt clogged by the noise that filled them, lungs struggling for breath, air unable to make its way into my heaving chest, not even able to produce a sound other than the guttural coughing that wrestled with that damned rumbling for loudest sound in my head.

The dirt that fell from my lips was a surprise, I'll admit. Spittle dribbling down my chin as I hacked up pure earth, damp and warm, an infestation of soil that sent wracks down my body as I tried to purge it away. When I dared to look down at the not insignificant pile that was building in front of me, Syl was standing happily next to it. I watched, rapt, as he slowly leaned forward and plucked a worm from the mass, swallowing it's writhing form with quick precision.

I stumbled to my feet, and flung myself towards the window, hands shaking as I pried the latch up and threw it open. It didn't long for Syl to flit up past me, wing briefly brushing my face as he passed, and out the window. I slammed it as soon as the stiffness in my fingers allowed. There was coal dust on the windowsill, my fingerprints etched into it. It still hasn't washed off, even now.

And that was that. My Sylvester was gone, flown off into the world, never to be seen again, by me at least. I cleaned up the dirt, and sold the cage, leaving the bags of food home to my parents, because I couldn't stand the sight of even those.

Luka never did ask me out. I think he could tell I held some resentment against him, even if he didn't know for what. Not his fault, not really, he could never have known. But sometimes I think I can hear it, that swelling, echoing song, drifting in at the windows, and I feel my chest constricted by fallen wooden beams, and dirt.

Statement Ends.

I'm sure you've figured it out by now, but this is the only one of the stack so far that's refused digital uptake. I understand these are the only ones you think *worthy* of follow up, but that is *not* how your job is supposed to work.

Of course you could always ask me how your job is supposed to work considering I am the one with a degree in *library science*, but of course your pride comes first, I understand

At any rate-- the notes here say that Mars was able to get an interview with Susannah-- oh, *Jesus Christ.* Great. So *that* went as well as an interview with Mars could've gone. Suffice to say there was very little information given from *that.* Cassian handled Luka, though, who confirmed everything said in the statement from his own perspective. No matter the ultimate outcome, it's clear that the story is given merit by its consistency across multiple subjects.

That'll be all, for now.

End recording.

[Theme plays.]

OUTRO

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[Theme ends.]